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Alpaugh water fees may triple

It's either a big increase or a loss of service for the Tulare County town.

By Joan Obra

Alpaugh residents may see their water fees triple to avoid losing service at the end of the month.

The debate will unfold tonight at a Tulare County Water Works District 1 meeting. The district, which provides water service to homes in Alpaugh, faces an unpalatable choice: raise its monthly \$20 household fee or go without the arsenic-tainted and undrinkable water.

Tulare County Water Works' contract with its only supplier, Alpaugh Irrigation District, which supplies water to farmers in the area, ends July 1. And Alpaugh Irrigation, which provides water, recordkeeping and maintenance services to Tulare County Water Works, is scaling back its role. The district will sell only water as of July 1, at a monthly price of \$43.50 for a household.

"We can no longer do it for \$20," said Alpaugh Irrigation board president Steve Martin. The district, which didn't increase prices fast enough to meet the rising cost of delivering water, amassed an estimated \$330,000 power bill during the state energy crisis. Last month, Alpaugh Irrigation customers approved a monthly fee increase from \$20 to \$68.

If Tulare County Water Works wants to keep its 170 hookups flowing, Martin said, it must also raise rates.

Tulare County Water Works can't raise prices until a July 17 election. The property-related fee increase requires voter approval under Proposition 218, a process Tulare County Water Works officials started after they learned the outcome of Alpaugh Irrigation's vote.

At tonight's Tulare County Water Works' informational meeting, leaders will explain the rules. To block the possible fee increase, 51% of property owners in the district must submit protest votes in writing. No protest vote means approval of the price jump.

But misinformation already is rampant. Sandra Meraz, Tulare County Water Works board president, interrupted an interview Tuesday when a screaming and crying farmworker arrived.

The farmworker thought the water was getting turned off today, Meraz explained later.

Part of the confusion stems from Prop. 218. A section of it calls eligible voters "owners of record." Another calls them "tenants ... directly liable to pay the assessment, fee, or charge in question."

Alpaugh Irrigation's board limited the voter pool to property owners, sending each English-only notices.

There weren't enough Spanish-speaking voters to warrant bilingual notices, Martin explained in May.

But that move left Spanish speakers and renters angry. As a result, Chris Schneider, executive director of Central California Legal Services, is building a lawsuit against Alpaugh Irrigation.

The district "should have sent notices to renters in addition to property owners," he said.

Tulare County Water Works may also come under Schneider's fire.

The district sent notices only to property owners because "it's a property-related fee," attorney Patrick Enright said. He's not yet sure whether Tulare County Water Works will accept renters' protest votes at the July 17 meeting